

11. Beginning to Pray

Since prayer is a gift of love, God does not impose it upon us, nor is it something that happens just because we want it to happen. Communion with God is offered to all of us all the time. It must, however, be welcomed by us in love. Teresa sees that one reason for our neglect of prayer is our failure to realise that we are held in existence by a God of love who delights in us and who longs to commune with us:

Each of us has a soul, but, since we do not prize souls as is deserved by creatures made in the image of God, we do not understand the deep secrets that lie in them (*Interior Castle* VII.1.1).

The soul is a paradise where the Lord says he finds his delight (*Interior Castle* I.1.1).

In its centre very secret exchanges between God and the soul take place (*Interior Castle* I.1.3).

If we undertake the journey to our heart, the journey of prayer, we will know for ourselves the truth of what Teresa has said. We will also learn how to journey to the heart of the people loved by God and of the world of which we are part. In prayer we learn to listen to the feelings, the images, the thoughts, the longings that we find in this inner world, and we learn to discern when these are coming from our soul-connection with God and when they are arising from forces that are resisting the attraction of grace. It is only when all our feelings, all our thoughts, all our dreams, all our creative energy, and all our loving comes from our own authentic centre, that is to say, from our communion with God, that we will experience the full freedom of being ourselves. Teresa urges us:

Let us exert ourselves, for the love of the Lord. Let us abandon our reason and our fears into his hands. Let us forget this natural weakness that can take up so much of our attention ...

Care only about moving quickly so as to see the Lord (*Interior Castle* III.2.8).

There is nothing so personal or so demanding as prayer. We should not expect it to be otherwise. To enjoy communion with the source of our being will require of us much discipline and detachment, and a humble and alert listening to the movements of our soul which are being inspired by God. To enjoy communion with God we must set out in a determined way and persevere. We will need patience, lest we be discouraged by distractions, darkness and a feeling of failure.

Using an image that was familiar in sixteenth century Spain, Teresa likens the soul to a castle. God dwells in the central chambers, drawing us to God's self. She pictures the journey of prayer as one in which we move through the castle – the interior castle which is our soul – from the outer rooms to the centre, yielding to the attraction of love which is inviting us to be at home in our soul with God. She speaks in terms of a journey of seven stages.

We take our first steps when we begin to take prayer and the spiritual life seriously. However, at the beginning we are still basically self-centred. We still think in terms of what *we* want and what *we* can do and how *we* can respond to grace. We have not yet surrendered to grace. We have not yet fully welcomed the love-communion that God is offering. This means that God, who will not force love, assists us by grace, but within the limits that we impose because we are not yet ready to entrust ourselves entirely to God's love. For this reason we speak of *active* prayer: it is prayer that *we* do. As beginners in prayer, we discover that we have little insight into sin or grace, and so we have little self-knowledge or knowledge of God. We are spiritually quite anaemic. We are leading distracted lives, caught up in the pursuit of trivial pleasures, and concerned with our reputation and honour. Our lives are rather superficial, with a lot of pretence. However, it

is also true that we have good desires and once in a while we entrust ourselves to the Lord and reflect on who we are.

As our prayer deepens, we find ourselves becoming more sensitive to God's word coming to us in the events of our life, through good teaching, through other people sharing their spiritual experiences, through spiritual reading, and through the joys and the trials of life. However, we find that we are still not avoiding occasions of sin and we find ourselves slipping back.

Here in Part Two I would like to look with you at some of the things which we can do in these early stages of our prayer-journey. Firstly, however, there are some principles about which we need to be clear. These summarise many of the matters which we examined in Part One.

First, it is important not to forget that, since prayer is loving communion with God, and since God is always the one to begin the communion, the best prayer is the prayer which God is offering. Let us gratefully accept and treasure whatever communion God is offering us now, for God knows our present capacity to respond. We need to remember that to turn towards God is already to be in prayer.

Secondly, we must constantly remind ourselves that God is offering us the intimacy of this communion.

Thirdly, the value or quality of our prayer is measured by the fruit which it produces in our lives: our obedience, our humility and especially our love. Teresa writes:

It is in the effects and deeds following afterwards that one discerns the true value of prayer (*Interior Castle* IV.2.8).

Fourthly, whatever happens, Teresa tells us: 'we must not abandon prayer' (*Life* 8.5). If we do, she offers the only remedy: we must 'begin again' (*Interior Castle* II.1.10).

Fifthly, we should not expect the journey to be one of simple progression:

There is no stage of prayer so sublime that it is not necessary often to return to the beginning (Teresa, *Life* 13.15).

Sixthly, it is important to follow the advice of Teresa and 'set our eyes on Christ' (*Interior Castle* I.2.11). Jesus will journey with us leading us to a deeper knowledge of the true God – a knowledge that comes through love. He will also lead us to a deeper knowledge of our real selves, for in Jesus we see what it means to be made in God's image and likeness. We see also who we are called to be. Furthermore, we see by comparison how sinful we are. This acts as a warning. It nurtures humility and safeguards us from thinking that any value we have comes from ourselves. It reinforces our longing to gaze on God, the sole source of all good.

Seventhly, if we are serious about prayer we must be resolute in turning away from sin, for it blocks out the light of God and opens our souls to darkness. We will need a resolute will to detach ourselves from whatever is cluttering up our lives and holding us back. This will vary from person to person, and according to each one's state of life. If we are serious about prayer we must try to live virtuous lives in obedience to God's will as revealed to us through the ordinary means of God's providence. We must not be looking for consolations, but learn to embrace the cross. We need to be very careful not to be too self-reliant. This does not mean that we should be overly reliant on others and fail to appreciate the gift of God that we are as well as the gifts that God has given us, but it does require that we keep alert to the truth that all we are and all we have is gift. We are

to listen to Jesus reminding us to become like a child in recognising our dependence on God and relying on God's grace.

Finally, while there is some value in studying prayer 'from the outside', we will only truly be helped to the extent that we are praying. Without praying we can learn what God is doing in people's lives and we can get some idea of the intimate communion to which God is inviting us. However, we can understand what other people tell us about prayer only to the extent that their words shed light on our own personal experience of prayer. Teresa herself tells us this:

As much as I desire to speak clearly about these matters of prayer they will be really obscure for one who has not had experience (*Life* 10.9).